

SR 520 BRIDGE REPLACEMENT AND HOV PROGRAM



SR 520 Ombudsman & Community Liaison

Excerpt from the ombudsman's introductory message to community members:

"Megaprojects like the SR 520 Program in Seattle can deliver numerous benefits: ... safer bridges that can withstand earthquakes; neighborhoods reconnected via lids over the highway; more reliable transit trips with better places to wait for buses; a world-class, regional biking/walking trail network; and smoother driving connections between the east and west sides of Lake Washington, from I-5 to I-405.

But building such megaprojects also comes with impacts, challenges and trade-offs for members of the community. Throughout the next several years of construction, WSDOT and Washington's governor and Legislature want to ensure that citizens have somewhere to go with concerns about issues such as noise, dust, work lights at night, and disruption to traffic patterns or routes for walking and biking. The state also wants people to be confident of a fair hearing by decision makers at the highest levels.

That's now my job."

-- David Goldberg

Updates from the new Ombudsman & Community Liaison



David Goldberg
Ombudsman &
Community Liaison

I opened the office of the Ombudsman & Community Liaison on May 8, 2017. The very early days were filled with learning the various components, issues and players (and myriad acronyms) associated with the SR 520 megaproject. But then I quickly got to work meeting community leaders, frontline neighbors of the current West Approach Bridge North (WABN) project and upcoming Montlake Phase construction, and their elected representatives.

Over the next several weeks I met with stakeholders at a number of meetings and events, including those of the Montlake Community Club, Montlake Transportation Committee, WABN monthly public meetings, Portage Bay/Roanoke Park Community Council, Portage Bayshore Condominiums, the Arboretum and Botanical Gardens Committee, Section 106 Concurring Parties, Madison Park residents, Seattle Neighborhood Greenways and others.

To introduce my office to a wider audience, I worked with SR 520 communications to create a web page and video. We also sent an introductory email to more than 2,000 stakeholders in the SR 520 database.

Most importantly, I scheduled one-on-one listening sessions with the most active and vocal project neighbors and community leaders, in an effort to begin building the critical personal relationships needed to be an effective community liaison.

Almost to a person, these stakeholders expressed appreciation that WSDOT had created and filled this role. Even though some were frustrated by WSDOT actions in the past, nearly all said they felt more hopeful having a designated go-to person with the latitude to investigate concerns and work toward creative solutions.

Legislative updates. I began a pattern of regular check-ins with legislators from the 43rd and 46th Districts, as well as with members of the Seattle City Council – particularly Council Member Rob Johnson, with whom I and SR 520 leaders meet monthly. Legislators also have contacted me directly when constituents have raised questions or concerns.

Issues and activities

Below are highlights of some of the issues addressed and activities undertaken since inception of the office of the Ombudsman & Community Liaison:

A noise-reduction fence for Shelby-Hamlin neighbors



Acoustifence material will accompany the 12-foot-tall fence.

The Montlake phase includes construction of a lid over 520 and other activities that will create substantial impacts – and benefits – for adjacent neighbors. In early 2017, SR 520 Program representatives met with the neighbors to discuss their preference for construction screening during the next phase. The consensus was for fast-growing shrubs and trees rather than a solid fence. Later, however, as WSDOT was evaluating noise impacts as part of an application for a noise variance from the City of Seattle, program leaders became concerned that vegetation alone would provide too little noise reduction for that area.

I worked with neighborhood representatives and 520 noise and construction experts to create an alternative plan that gives neighbors the greenery they prefer to see, backed by a 12-foot chain link fence covered with a sound blanket that will help

dampen construction noise. Neighbors said they were pleased with the new plan, as well as the concern shown for their well-being. The trees will be planted this fall while the new fence likely will be installed at the start of the next phase of construction.

Montlake Market property acquisition

WSDOT's decision to pursue acquisition of the Montlake Boulevard Market and adjoining gas station through eminent domain presented a complex communications challenge as it triggered strong reactions within the neighborhood. While the legal process is underway, I am working to keep community leaders and legislators apprised about developments, decisions and rulings. As several key community leaders expressed disappointment about losing the market, I worked to keep lines of communication open for future engagement – I hope with some success.

The Montlake Neighborhood Traffic Management Plan (NTMP)



Example of a traffic circle in Seattle, one of many potential traffic-calming measures under consideration.

Under a 2011 memorandum of understanding with the city of Seattle, WSDOT and the Seattle Department of Transportation committed to identify traffic control and management measures to support people traveling through Montlake during SR 520 construction and beyond.

Earlier this year WSDOT and SDOT issued a draft plan for public comment. As the next phase moves toward selection of a contractor, community leaders said they had anxiety that the community did not feel connected to the process for finalizing the traffic management plan that would affect their lives for several years.

I worked with WSDOT and SDOT to develop a process for further engaging the Montlake community not only to offer input on the final plan, but also to explore with SDOT leaders some of the community questions and concerns about other challenges and projects affecting the neighborhood.

Major Public Project Construction Noise Variance



Crews use a hoe ram to remove parts of the old westbound SR 520 off-ramp to Lake Washington Boulevard.

At the city's direction, WSDOT in April applied for a multi-year variance defining allowable noise limits for nighttime work. The application created concerns within the community. I engaged several community leaders to better understand their concerns. Since that time, I have worked to better understand the noise limits, mitigation measures and conditions of the variance in order to provide good information and translate the technical details for a lay audience. I learned, and have attempted to convey to residents, that many of the practices and mitigation measures – including an onsite monitor with the ability to stop construction in the case of noise exceedances – would not be required under temporary noise variances. I am working to arrange one or more information sessions in the neighborhood to help explain the permit and its conditions. The timing of those sessions could depend on the progress of two appeals of the variance approval that have been filed with the city's Hearing Examiner, who is expected to consider them in December.

Community Construction Management Plan (CCMP)



Craftsman-style house, circa 1915.

Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the SR 520 Program entered a programmatic agreement that requires production of a Community Construction Management Plan showing the steps the contractor and WSDOT will take to reduce construction impacts on the surrounding historic district. Previous versions of the document have been print-oriented and difficult to update in response to changing circumstances and community concerns. Responding to queries from nearby residents who wanted to know more about the plan and its status, I began engaging with SR 520 leaders about creating an interactive, web-based CCMP that can be a one-stop center for information, questions and feedback on all aspects of community impacts. In creating this resource, I will work to ensure that we engage community members on the front end about the best way to organize, design and present the content to meet their needs.

All that ... and goats, too!



WSDOT used a goat maintenance crew to control grass and weeds near the Portage Bay Bridge.

When residents of the Portage Bay area earlier this year pointed out to WSDOT that vegetation beneath the SR 520 bridge was significantly overgrown, program leadership arranged to deploy some goats to chomp it back. Unfortunately, the small number of ruminants could only put a dent in the job before they had to be moved elsewhere. When some residents reached out to me with a plea to get the goats back, I began working with the SR 520 team to secure a private contractor to bring a much larger herd to the site in September, and kept the community informed about the status of the goats and their work along the way.

As an aside, goat-related tweets and posts have proved to be the most liked and shared of all SR 520 social media actions.

Conclusion: Reflections on launching a new approach to community engagement

The creation of the ombudsman role is a bold experiment in accountability and responsiveness to community concerns on the part of WSDOT and the State of Washington. It is an acknowledgement that building a highway megaproject within a city and its neighborhoods is inherently disruptive, but that the state bears responsibility for ensuring that it is not unnecessarily so.

Fulfilling the ombudsman role requires some potentially tricky navigation among the WSDOT leaders to whom it reports, the affected constituencies and the elected officials who represent them. Most of all, it requires a WSDOT team willing to be responsive to feedback, creative in finding solutions and open to being challenged from time to time. To a person, I have found the SR 520 staff and WSDOT leaders to possess those qualities.

They have been welcoming, forthcoming with information and open to frank discussion of issues raised by those in the affected communities. There are sure to be bumps and challenges as we move into the next phase of construction, but with continued commitment to compassionate engagement with the community, I am confident WSDOT can deliver the project in exemplary fashion

Next steps

As noted above, the following are some of the upcoming efforts that I am planning:

- An Oct. 11 meeting with the Montlake Community Club Transportation Committee to review the final Neighborhood Traffic Management Plan;
- Information sessions on the Major Public Project Construction Noise Variance;
- Consultation on development of the Community Construction Management Plan and soliciting input from community members;
- Working with the SR 520 team on the requirements and incentives for minimizing community impacts to be included in the Montlake phase design-build contract.

Contact me

Please feel free to reach out to me at any time with concerns or questions about SR 520 megaproject.

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